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Cube #347's Excellent Adventure, Part II

*Deja vu: the illusion that one has previously had a given experience
-Webster's New World Dictionary

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In "Cube #347's Excellent Adventure, Part I":

It was a dark and stormy night. Or a bright and sunny morning. In the blackness of space, it doesn't really matter. An accident so improbable it was fated to occur stranded 175 Banshee crewmembers (including a disproportionate number of command staff), two dogs, a parrot, a hamster, and a small Altarian palm aboard an unknowing Cube #347. In an attempt to contact the Federation, the Banshee crew not only failed miserably, they transported the cube and occupants far into the past. Alerted to the presence of unknown sentients on board, Cube #347 corralled most of the refugees in a cargo hold, but eighteen were assimilated when caught outside the safe area when force fields were activated. Now, scared out of their wits, the Banshee crew waits to discover their fate....

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The Banshee crew stood huddled in the center of the Bulk Cargo Hold #3, feeling like milling sheep waiting for the slaughter truck to arrive. A containment field shimmered in the low light at every egress from the vast area, dark humanoid shapes visible on the other side. The officers had carefully positioned themselves in the center of the crowd, mutual thoughts revolving around the number one fact of Starfleet: while ensigns and other minor crewmen are replaceable, named officers of rank are not, but why take chances?

"Who are we missing?" whispered Captain Jad Vorezze, looking at the others. There was no reason for the low voices, except that the mood demanded it.

Lieutenant Commander Dan Smith looked at his PADD, scrolling down the list of names of those who had been outside the cargo area when the force field had shimmered into existence. "I'm assuming all those not here are lost. Eighteen of the crew who were transported here are gone." Dan sighed, a wordless expression of the knowledge they all would be reunited with the missing members soon enough, as well as meeting several trillion new best friends. "The list is as follows." Dan read down the display, ending with, "...Ensign - can't pronounce his first name - T'grath and Lieutenant Carla Franson."

Chief Engineer Lieutenant Commander David Riley gave a moan, "Franson? She was the best of the night shift! She even /liked/ her duty assignment. Never a word of complaint that I ever heard. If she had asked, I would have put her on day shift in an instant."

Above in the darkness, an intercom system squealed to life, feedback noise causing most of the crew to put hands over ears. Except for Zeke the hamster, who, displaying unhamsterlike agility, ran up Dr. Liz Lang's leg to hide in a trouser pocket. After the initial pronouncement of doom and assimilation thirty minutes prior, nothing more had been forthcoming. The Collective

Voice boomed:

"We are Borg. The situation has changed. One will speak for all. Who will it be?"

Jad was pushed rudely out of protective custody, by whom, he did not know. "Hey!" he protested as he half-turned to glare at his "loyal" crew, all of whom were giving him the look that assimilation in the next few minutes would be purely his fault. "You should not treat your captain so!"

"Captain Jad Vorezze of the Federation starship Banshee. Betazoid. Species possesses rudimentary empathic and occasionally telepathic abilities. You will speak for all." The last was not a question, but a statement of fact.

"Rudimentary?" snorted Jad as he looked up at the ceiling, then at the walls, unsure of the direction he should address. Straightening a shirt that had seen better days, he replied, "I will have you know..."

"That your mental abilities are irrelevant. The distinctiveness of your species has been added to the Borg, and you will not be able to affect us. Captain Jad Vorezze, your existence as a small being hinges upon your cooperation."

"Cooperation at what?"

"Your meddling in our systems has thrown this cube back in time. Preliminary analysis indicates a range of seven to eight thousand Federation years before present, but exact date is unknown as of yet. We are attempting to narrow the era."

"What difference do we make? Excuse me for being pragmatic, but why don't you just assimilate us, contact whatever Borg are in this time if you need assistance, then go back to the present?" Many crewmembers groaned as Jad essentially gave an open invitation to the Borg. Sentiment among those hoping for salvation was for their captain to get on his knees and pitifully beg for the Collective to leave them alone.

Silence. The words which came next were almost...apologetic. The tone /had/ to be a figment of the imagination. "The Collective does not yet exist. The sub-collective of this cube is alone. Damage to systems associated with temporal activity is severe, but it will be fixed. We are enroute to planet #1 to confirm our exact placement on the tau vector."

"So, what use are we?"

"We do not wish to alter certain historical events which will lead to the eventual rise of the Collective. Planet #1, even at this poorly documented time, should be able to provide certain necessary system components for the temporal machinery that we are unable to replicate. You will be our liaison with the beings of planet #1."

"What do we get in return?"

"You remain small beings, unless any decide to enter the Collective. You also get transport back to our native time."

Jad replied, "Just a minute, I need to discuss this with the others." He motioned the command staff near, as well as any senior officers present. A brief, yet intense, debate followed. In the end, it was acknowledged that while there was no way to make the Borg keep any promises they made, postponement of the issue was a wonderful way to allow avenues of opportunity to appear. Kinda like jumping out of a twenty story burning building: with the dangerous flames immediately behind, the next challenge to survival was the bounce several long seconds away.

Boomed the Collective Voice, "Enough time for talking. What is your consensus?"

"We will do it. Um, if I may ask, what significance is this planet #1?"

"Planet #1 is the original Borg homeworld."

Silence from the Banshee crew. Maybe out of the frying pan and into the fire was a more apt description of the present situation.

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In a way, the entire exercise was amusing. Separated from their ship and weapons, out of contact with their superiors, the attempts of the Banshee crew to act defiant were laughable. Too bad that was the only bright spot in the current crisis.

Cube #347 had already turned and was in a conduit traveling at top speed towards planet #1; what had been omitted to the Federationers was the fact it would take the better part of a month to arrive at the destination.

Besieged by continuously updated reports on repair occurring around the cube (the automatic regeneration system had been activated, but that only complicated the problem as the computer added its own input), Captain was hard-pressed to keep the illusion of stilted plurality going for the sake of the unassimilated audience. After coercing assistance from the Federationers, he decreased his primary conscious in the area to the most basic awareness. {Second, what are the projected options? I need your partition back in the general hierarchy to assist with data processing.}

{You don't want to know the projected options,} stated Second within the intranet.

{Give them.}

{I warned you.} The options gushed into the general awareness of the sub-collective. Drones all over the ship stopped for a moment to more fully take them in; activity resumed.

{Those aren't options, those are creative ways to suicide.}

{Told you. The probabilities will change depending on exact time period we have arrived in, technological capability of planet #1, trustworthiness of the Banshee crew and our ability to keep them acting for us, etcetera and so on.}

Captain sighed. Physically he beamed himself to the outer hull to personally inspect the damage. Ignoring the visible phenomenon of faster-than-light travel, he watched ship systems rebuilding part of the deflector system.

{Delta?}

{We are working to fix the chromaton bottle as fast as possible. Check the internal maintenance logs if you want updates, and stop bothering me. I am too busy being two places at once.} Delta's double signature was definitely annoyed. Captain drew back.

Captain hated not having full access to the archives of the Collective as he (or others in the sub-collective) needed them. Until this point, he had been unaware how much those distant files were used; automatic queries which did not require the attention of the Greater Collective, but necessary none-the-less. The current data storage within electronic and organic pathways - more information than the entire Federation/Klingon/Romulan empires had in their combined computer networks - was just not sufficient! How was a proper consensus supposed to be made in such circumstances?

Responsibility, responsibility, responsibility...how he hated it and how he looked forwards to the time he was simply 4 of 8 once more. If the hellacious assignment ever ended, that is. Duty inevitably called once more as the Federation crew, more specifically the one designated Jad Vorezze, demanded the attention of the Borg. Captain grumbled, then transported himself back to his nodal intersection.

"Second?"

"I'm just a Second," replied Second frostily. "The Federation people are your responsibility. You talk to them."

With a wicked thought, Captain suddenly dumped a large portion of the more repetitive command load on a certain reserve consensus monitor. The curses which followed were entertaining to listen to. Perhaps there were a few perks with being Captain.

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Lieutenant Commander Ben Rachow tapped Jad on the arm, then leaned close in a scheming whisper, which none-the-less was perfectly audible to everyone within twenty feet.

"Captain, you know...I read in the files about Voyager and their acquisition of a shapely female Borg when they were in a position similar to this. You know, when the EMH managed to contact the Federation. Get my drift?"

Vorezze looked at the practically drooling lieutenant commander, then around at the other faces nearby. Most of the male ones had a similar gleam to their eyes, while the female ones had stony visages. Jad came to a quick decision, hormones temporarily overriding good sense as certain pictures came to mind. He separated himself from the crowd.

"Ahem...um, Borg? Are you listening?"

"We are always listening," came the booming reply.

"Well...you know us individuals aren't really all that comfortable talking with disembodied voices, bulkheads, and the like. Intimidating, yes...but one can hardly expect for us to efficiently get our work done." Jad paused as he contemplated the wisdom of the request he was about to make, but the moment of sanity was fleeting. "We've heard about how time to time you've made concessions to our limited capacity. Picard of the Enterprise and Janeway of Voyager come to mind. Think you might have someone to be a liaison drone?" A cheesy smile crept across Jad's face, much like the one he used as a child during class photos.

The intercom was silent for a time, long enough for the crew to begin buzzing about their eventual fate when they were no longer useful. Finally the reply came. "We will comply."

At the main opening of cargo hold to exterior corridor, the sound of a single set of footsteps traversing over metal echoed. Closer came the noise, until a tall shape loomed behind the force field, exact form impossible to determine due to wavering effects. Anticipation arose, from male and female crew alike; then the Borg easily stepped through the barrier, as if it were not there. This drone was definitely not a candidate for the Miss Galaxy pageant.

A few fingers over two meters, the Borg was the typical humanoid specimen: clad in black body armor, half the face hidden with implants, prosthetic limb, mottled gray flesh where such was visible. A lipless mouth was a straight line below a bump of a "nose" which really wasn't such an organ - no nostrils visible. The fingers on the normal hand were five; the limb opposite was a complex assemblage of hardware. The unaltered eye which took in the scene of the cargo hold was a surprising dark blue in color. Tentatively the Borg was classified as male, although the probably irrelevant task at gender labeling was unconfirmable without actually asking, which no one was going to do.

The Borg stopped in front of Jad. "Captain Vorezze. I will be your liaison. My designation is 4 of 8 of Exploratory-class Cube #347, but you may call me Captain, as I know the unassimilated generally do not like to utilize numerical strings as names."

"No!" cried Ben's voice from the interior of the silently watching Banshee crew. "It wasn't supposed to work like that!"

A feeling of heat was rising to Jad's face; he hoped the Borg would disregard the outburst, although second thoughts had wished thinking that Rachov hadn't been one of the ones caught outside. The mental tangent brought a certain question to mind, which Jad asked, attempting to project the air of authority. "What has happened to my crew whom were not in this hold when the force field was activated."

Captain did not look very impressed. "What do you think happened? They were assimilated, of course! Ask an idiotic question...." The mangled cliché was not finished. "Your crew is beyond your help, so stop thinking about ways to 'liberate' them." A short pause. "As I am the liaison, I suppose I should tell you the mess you got us all into when you fools were messing with circuits and systems you could not even begin to understand."

"Maybe I should get the rest of my command staff here. Just a second." Jad turned and yelled for certain officers to join his private party. The people in question looked like they would rather stay where they were currently standing, but slowly extricated themselves from the crowd to join their captain and the Borg. As Jad waited for all to arrive, he turned back to Captain, the nagging discrepancy in the conversation suddenly clicked. "What is with this 'I' thing."

"It will all be explained. Be patient."

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Captain was not impressed with the caliber of the Banshee officers. Whatever screening program was used in the Federation, it obviously hadn't been working of late. Or else the Enterprise had been a fluke. No...couldn't be; species which had successfully delayed the inevitable had been well organized, while those that fell quickly were more akin to this arguing bunch.

Jad Vorezze was the loudest of the group, continually altering between demands and irrelevant questions. Commander Charlotte Burns had enough miscellaneous hardware piercing her face that assimilation might lessen the burden. As Captain observed, the one known as David Riley cut himself on the edge of some sort of food? packet; at least he was chewing on the substance inside. Lieutenant Commander Dan Smith was quiet, although he occasionally muttered soundless comments to himself. Lieutenant Commander Ben Rachow appeared to be fidgeting as he looked at the back of one Dr. Liz Lang. Meanwhile, Dr. Lang was absently stroking a small hairball with legs.

Captain focused on the hairball, or more precisely, he felt Doctor appropriate several sensor points and train them on the animal. Vorezze was in the midst of yet another inane question as Captain asked, "Dr. Lang, is that furry thing you are holding an animal or a sentient?"

"What is it to you?" The response was hostile, snappy. Vorezze looked slightly put out about being interrupted, then turned pale as he located the source of the query. Several others also quieted as blood drained from their faces.

"Is it an animal or a sentient?"

"It is Zeke, my hamster. He's an animal. And if you or anyone else touch him, I'll have to hurt you."

"A warning, Dr. Lang. Keep an eye on your animal. In fact, keep an eye on all the nonsentients in here. We don't want them to get loose, not that it would happen, would it?"

A voice catcalled, "Can't let you off your leash anymore, Ben!", but was ignored. The last statement had not been directed at the Banshee crew, but at a certain drone in Maintenance Bay

#5 who was supposed to be working on personnel repairs. Doctor's mental presence faded back into the general mob watching the proceedings and making snide comments. Not that the sub-collective's own record was anything to gloat over.

Vorezze cleared his throat, "Um, Captain Borg?"

"Captain will do." This was the third time Vorezze had tried to tack a "Borg" after the "Captain" sub-designation.

"Well, yes...Captain. Could you explain this assimilation imperfection once more? I think I almost had it that time." While the Banshee captain may have been having a hard time grasping the concept, several others of the so-called command staff appeared immensely bored. Before Captain could explain yet again, Burns butted in.

"Captain...it works like this. They be like us in a way, namely expendable. This expendability comes about because the group on this ship isn't able to mesh smoothly with the trillions of the majority. Each one is enough of a single being that they are rejected by the Collective, yet enough a Borg that they can't be simply flushed into the waste recycler. In other words, the drones on this ship have minds of their own, but are in sufficient harmony to kick our butts at any time they want."

Vorezze was silent, the brief explanation finally sinking in. He looked at Captain. "And the reason your name is Captain is...?"

Replied Captain, "Because I am the current controlling consensus initiator and expediter of this sub-collective. I am the one who is All this assignment."

Several long seconds of silence followed. It was broken by yet another exasperating question, this time by Dr. Lang. "What is this 'assignment' you mentioned."

"Irrelevant. You are all irrelevant." Captain lost his patience as his voice rose from the steady tone he had been using. Even with Second taking much of the burden, even with the general trickling down of responsibility in the command and control hierarchy, there was much which demanded his attention. He could not stand here all cycle and answer every little thought which flickered in the minds of the Federationers. There was too much to do. "Captain Jad Vorezze. You will come with me. The rest can wait here. That will be more efficient."

Before Vorezze could object, Captain caught the Betazoid in a transporter lock, then beamed himself and the Federation captain elsewhere.

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Silence reigned in the cargo hold. Finally it was broken by a voice in the ranks.

"Vorezze is bloody well lost...that means," pause, "Charlotte is in charge...."

Eyes riveted on Charlotte, who was standing quite still, obviously wondering if losing the captain was a good thing or a bad thing. Well, it couldn't get much worse, so might as well look on the optimistic side.

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"Where are we?" gasped Jad as the shock wore off from the unexpected transportation.

Captain frowned as he looked around. He was supposed to be in his local nodal intersection, but this obviously wasn't it. Consulting a map of the cube, he found he was in the right subsection, submatrix, but a good ten minute walk from his objective.

{Captain,} reported Delta, {there are some odd fluctuations with the target destination

lock on the transporter. It is related to the current strain caused by the ship regeneration system, and will need to be recalibrated once deflector and superstructure work is completed. My hierarchy will get to it as it can. Use the transporters at your own risk.}

{Now you tell me,} grumbled Captain. He plotted the best route back to his precious contraband viewscreen. {Why didn't you make a general announcement about it?}

{I did, but you obviously weren't paying attention. Now, I've work to do, and not enough bodies to supervise it all.}

Captain reviewed general messages in the last thirty minutes, spotting the announcement. It was neatly scrunched between his own background searches for data, an automatic repair report from the computer, a stupid question by Riley, and Weapons complaining that tractor emitters damaged on face #5 weren't getting fixed fast enough. Very obvious...once one got through all the white noise.

"I said," spoke Jad louder, "where are we?" He added a few seconds later, "And am I ever going to see my crew again?"

Captain gave Vorezze a disgusted glare. "We are in subsection 17, submatrix 10, a ten minute hike from where I want to be. Again, courtesy of your crew tossing us back in time eighty or so centuries. The problem is being taken care of; until then, we walk. Follow me. If you try any desperate escape, I'll simply tell the nearest drones to assimilate you. There are plenty left in Bulk Cargo Hold #3 to do our bidding." He took off down the catwalk, a still stunned Jad trotting along behind without complaint. The silence from the officer was not to last.

"Wha? What's that?" The question came a distance behind Captain, indicating Vorezze had stopped to look at something. Captain turned around to see what had caught the other's attention.

Trundling along at the same level was a three-meter long centipede - ten segments per meter - of a dark red-black color. Only knee high, it brushed past Vorezze, circumference ruff of antennae serving the same function as the eyes it did not have. The only way to tell it was a drone and thus belonged on the cube was the sparse scattering of external implant attachments and the fact that the head was completely replaced by machinery.

It stopped halfway between Captain and the Federation officer, lifted up the fore third of its body to detach a panel, then smoothly scurried into the interstitial space. As it disappeared, the panel was passed adroitly from leg pair to leg pair (all limbs were capable of manipulating objects), until the last two segments were reached. These four legs pulled the panel shut behind such that it was not possible to tell the insectoid had been present.

Captain sent a mild rebuke to the drone about his timing, who thusly replied that Delta was on its engineering butt to physically survey power conduits in the submatrix. Aloud, "That was 2 of 3. Original species is #7001, named (click)gclok!" Captain managed to pronounce the ending whistle of the designation without mangling too badly. "Subterranean insectoids. Primary characteristics include multiple manipulatory limbs, diffuse neural network, and tactile sensory system. Excellent drones for maintenance in tight places, although due to difficulty in acquisition, few have been added to the Collective."

"(click)geeclock?" asked Vorezze. "That is a mouthful."

"Stop loitering and follow." Captain turned to continue his trek.

"Coming, coming, coming."

Over the course of the journey, several active Borg were encountered, most of the engineering hierarchy. There were those in their alcoves, of course, but they were either in

regeneration or contributing their neural resources to the on-going discussions (some highly tangential) in the dataspace. With each passage of drone, muscle implants adding electric whines to movements accompanied by clanking footfalls, Vorezze became obviously more nervous. Captain had just reprimanded 249 of 300 for purposefully stomping and leaning menacingly towards Vorezze as she passed when the latter stopped in his tracks once more. Captain followed the other's line of sight, expecting to see 2 of 3 again.

"Oh, gads," said Captain, unaware he had spoken aloud. "2 of 8, go back to your subsection, submatrix."

2 of 8 was the newest member of the Hierarchy of Eight, the eight drones from which captains were drawn in rotation, and as such she had only served as Captain twice. When trusted with responsibility as Captain or Second, 2 of 8 was perfectly competent; when she ranked no more and no less than any other in the command and control hierarchy, she was as loopy as any aboard the cube. Her greatest pet peeve was her dislike of the traditional Borg color scheme: gray, black, and silver, with green reserved to accent machinery for that final eerie touch.

Normally black body armor was painted a shocking pink, and gray skin had an oily purple sheen to it. 2 of 8 held up her hands - neither of which had been altered in her original assimilation - to show small studs pierced through finger webs. Looking more carefully at her face, Captain could also see a ring jauntily attached to the nose.

"I watched the one called Commander Charlotte Burns. She gave me the idea of body piercing. I thought I could find some good alloys and colored rocks to accent my current paint job. Do you think it will work? I just had to find you to try to convince you once more that such actions can only improve enthusiasm in the sub-collective as well as channel 'creativity' in less harmful directions."

Captain looked sideways. Vorezze was simply staring, mouth open, appearing to mumble the words, "Burns? Can't be...she is in the cargo hold. Please tell me she is in the cargo hold. She has got to be in the hold."

Sighing, Captain responded, "Now is not the best time, 2 of 8. Go back to your alcove and detail an action for consensus. I will allow it for discussion /after/ this mess is over; or you can hold it in the background until you rotate in for Captaincy. Until then, pick more subtle colors."

2 of 8 frowned, then activated the transporter. Following the signal, Captain noticed that /she/ made it to where she wanted to go. There was a sneaking suspicion the transporter wasn't as broken as Delta claimed, but he didn't care to take the time to trace every single error message being produced; if Delta was mad at him for some reason, the present method of payback was less harmful than some she had rigged in the past.

Vorezze shook his head, as if dismissing a bad dream. "That wasn't Burns was it? Or some sister I never knew she had?"

"No. Your Commander Burns is in Bulk Cargo Hold #3, leading a discussion on what to do if you don't come back." Captain paused to listen and watch for a few moments. "They don't seem very optimistic of your chances. Some of your crew are quite cheerful about that fact."

"When I get back..." Vorezze trailed off. "I am getting back, aren't I?"

"You are."

Finally the correct nodal intersection was reached, the normal decor on one wall overlaid with a viewscreen. As the pair entered, Captain sent command codes to the viewscreen to show a picture of what was occurring in Bulk Cargo Hold #3. Disliking the first perspective, he quickly shuffled through sensor views until one seemed to be right.

Vorezze stopped as he saw the scene on the screen: Burns surrounded by twenty or so wildly gesturing figures. Other people milled in the background. A big black dog chased a small white one around the periphery, while a parrot occasionally flew across the field of view. The chaos looked very busy.

"Is there sound?" asked Jad.

"Yes, but you don't want to hear it. We have other items to discuss. Correction, I have things to tell you, and I don't want billions of questions. Understand?" Vorezze mutely nodded, not displaying any of his earlier attempts to act like a macho Starfleet captain. "Good."

Captain began. "We are a month in transit to planet #1, the original Borg homeworld. However, the Collective does not exist in this time period, and historical records as to the condition of planet #1 in the pre-Borg era and for several years following inception of the Greater Consciousness are either lacking or sketchy. In other words, you and your crew will be our liaison to what are undoubtedly unassimilated beings. We need certain items, which the civilization should be able to supply, in order to finish ship repairs and return to our proper time. Once returned, we will figure out what to do with you."

Vorezze pointedly asked, "Why don't you just assimilate the population and get what you want, like you assimilated my eighteen crew members simply because they were outside the security field?"

"This cube has done stupid things," replied Captain, "but we will not be held responsible for screwing up the birth of the Borg." Vorezze just stared at him, obviously thinking thoughts that no Borg would be a good thing. Captain kept the agony of the knowledge that paradox aside, messing with the timeline would mean somewhere, a nonassimilated himself would be living the Hell of his family. He must not f**k up this opportunity to put things back to right. "Enough. You now know what you need to know. If there is anything vital you require, just state my name, and I'll ponder the request. Please do not try to escape or do anything more foolish than you already have."

Before Vorezze could ask another question, Captain locked him in a transporter and beamed him back to the cargo bay. Amazingly, the transporter worked...fancy that. He dropped his mind back into the chaos of the dataspace, ignoring the commotion occurring on the viewscreen as the Banshee's captain rematerialized unharmed.

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Captain's Log: Stardate unknown, location unknown

I'm recording this log on a modified tricorder...good thing they are designed to be more versatile than Swiss army knives and duct tape put together. Unfortunately, even tricorders can only do so much.

I finally convinced our Borg liaison 4 of 8, or Captain as he calls himself, to provide a food replicator unit. It has always been the joke of the Federation concerning their ration bars, but until now I was unaware what they did with the old ones; for some reason this cube has over sixty metric tons of ration bars dated 2291. Captain claims they are used as an organic substrate and base substance for certain systems. Anyway, the things are basically inedible for us mere mortals, but it took over a week of fast talking to get that point across.

The food replicator unit, when it was first beamed into our cargo bay, only gave a paste with the consistency of baby food and the taste of mashed squash. It supposedly contains an "efficient" blend of proteins, vitamins, and other supplements necessary for our multiracial crew.

I hate squash. No way I could convince Captain to program it with something more palatable, but he did allow some of my crew to work on modifying it.

In other developments....

Jad looked up as Dave cleared his throat again. "What?" asked Jad, ancient ration bar in one hand and tricorder log in the other.

"We got a new flavor out of the replicator!" said Dave excitedly as he waved his hands around.

"First it was peas, then mushrooms...what type of baby food do we have now?"

"Carrots," stated Dave with a smile.

Jad rolled his eyes, "Joy. Get turkey and cranberries, and all the ingredients for an old-style Terran Thanksgiving dinner will be available. Of course, one will have to eat it with a spoon." A bite on the ration bar, which was subsequently chewed and chewed and chewed.

Dave sighed. "Well, it is some variety. I'll go back to the job; I think the team had pickles there for a moment." Jad waved the engineer off.

The cargo bay had changed quite a bit since the force fields had first been activated. Lights were brighter, although they still shone all the time; day and night were yet another irrelevant concept as far as the Borg were concerned. Humidity and temperature also remained the same sweaty constant. However, temporary walls had been erected, effectively giving the hold floor the impression of office cubicle heaven.

The largest areas were sleeping quarters (bunk rooms would have been the appropriate name, except everyone slept on the floor), and even the officers had been forced to subject to the indignity of shared housing. Of course, it was also the only way to keep Ben from scaling the open-air rooms to peak in the women's bunk areas. Other pseudo-rooms included the meeting room and the commons, where the replicator unit was kept. Overall, the lodging of the Federation crew took up a depressingly small area within the large cargo hold. Dark bulky shapes at the far end were neatly stacked piles of metal scrap, spools of multicolored wire, and shrink-wrapped cartons of ration bars: the original contents. Seven large asteroids - petite on the cosmic scale, huge to those camped underneath - of bolonite ore completed the scene, looming over the cubicle city from their position of securement.

Also strewn about the hold were the aborted attempts of escape. Loose wires, open hatches, Borg hardware with its components scattered about in random fashion. All futile, as the Borg said...all futile. There was absolutely no way out of Bulk Cargo Hold #3 except under the watchful eyes of the Borg equivalent of security guards. Maybe if there had been a legendary Scotty in the crew, things would be different, but that was wishful thinking of the highest order.

"Dill pickles!" yelled Dave joyfully from the direction of the replicator. Definitely no Scotty here, thought Jad sadly.

The clanking sound of steps echoed from the corridor outside the main doorway into the hold. Jad looked up, as did the majority of the crew awake, looking for anything to catch their attention and relieve the boredom for a few minutes. Compared to the current monotony, Banshee at its dullest was a chaotic circus. Moving with ease through the security force field, Captain entered the hold. Jad stood up and approached.

Captain's eye was actively roving over the faces of the Banshee crew, looking for someone in particular. The gaze locked on Jad as the search ended. Jad squinted, taking in the minute facial variations which gave a slight clue as to the frame of mind the Borg was in, trying to feel thought patterns which were too vast to gain a proper perspective; the conclusion gave Jad

the shivers. It was times like that reflected in the drone's face which reminded Vorezze just how alien the Borg were in their mentality.

Sometimes when Jad conversed with Captain, it was evident there was only a single individual speaking in return. The concept of assimilation imperfection clear with the use of "I" and the general relaxed air to body posture and phrases used. The drone's eye reflected only a single mind behind it. Other times, and this was one of those times, Jad was acutely aware that four thousand others were also sitting in Captain's head, helping to form the words which were disturbingly full of random "we"s and other plurals...Vorezze wasn't even sure Captain was aware of the shift in phrasing.

"Captain Vorezze. You will come with this drone. We are nearing our objective."

Jad felt nervous, as he always did in the presence of the Borg. "Just me? And is it really necessary? I mean, you'll get to your original homeworld, and what good would any of us here serve?"

There was a distinct impatience in Captain's voice, "There are no suitable viewscreens in this hold; the only one is in my nodal intersection. We really doubt you could understand raw sensor data...I even have trouble interpreting it at times. You alone will come with us. As to necessity, we must explain again that we need you and your crew unassimilated to act as liaisons between us and those on planet #1 so that we may gain needed supplies.

"Of course, first we must find out our exact time in history, and the ancestral Borg world should give more precise clues than just astronomical data."

Jad sighed, pocketed his tricorder and ration bar remnant, and followed Captain.

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Captain beamed himself to his nodal intersection. Vorezze was also brought along. Over the past month the Federation beings had been a trial, demanding one thing after another. A food replicator, a change in the environment, a way to clean their clothes and their bodies, bathrooms, temporary walls...the list was endless. Most of the requests had been unnecessary to their continued health, but they appeared to be unaware of that reality, whining incessantly until key wants were filled.

The Federation people had better be worth the headache; Captain was beginning to regret his earlier weighted insistence to keep the crew unassimilated.

Cube #347 was nearing the end of its journey. The system of planet #1 had been entered hours ago. Currently the cube was holding a stationary position beyond the sixth planet (a miniature gas giant which did not exist in Captain's time, having been completely dismantled for gas and metals a thousand years prior), easily avoiding relatively primitive detection sensors. Sensors had reconfigured the grid to a medium-range range scan and was currently distributing information for study to various partition blocs. That data would form the basis of the decision tree which was to be commenced shortly.

Jad squinted at the viewscreen, the one thing seen thus far which had an obvious function. No weird oscillating lights, empty alcoves, or silent drones standing next to pillars with their palms (or other limb?) flat against circuitry. Unlike the other objects, the viewscreen also did not look like it had been manufactured by the Borg.

Unknown alphanumeric sped up one edge of the screen, odd characters with spiderlike tracings, extremely delicate and unlike that which would be expected from the Borg. On the

main body of the screen, a terrestrial planet of green, blue, and white was centered. Without warning, the planet flashed from the visual to a false-image of red and orange, then changed to a brown sphere with multicolored lines arcing from pole to pole.

"What am I looking at?" questioned Jad, blinking rapidly as the display altered once again, this time to a black circle with points of white dotted over dimly perceived landmasses. Sometime during the trip to the intersection, the many-ness behind Captain has leaked away until only the core personality remained.

"The original Borg homeworld, planet #1. This is a simplified interpretation of the datastreams currently being examined by the sensor hierarchy. We are still located among the outer planets of the system and have not been detected by local sensors or ships."

Jad hesitated, then asked, "Could I see the visual again? That one makes the most sense to me." The screen flickered again, this time to the scene first seen; no obvious movements had come from Captain's direction. In fact, the drone had taken up a stationary standing position in the middle of the intersection area. Out in the corridors, the sounds of movement by other Borg could be heard. "That doesn't look like what I expected. I thought the planet would be more...used."

Captain spoke, and when Vorezze glanced back, a definite frown had crossed the pale visage. "In our native position on the tau vector, planet #1 has long since been stripped of useful surface materials, and mines are currently tapping the metal core itself. Over forty billion reside on the surface. These are the correct coordinates for planet #1, but the physical aspects of the planet do not match." A long pause, then, "We have consensus that this planet is the ancestral world before the rise of the Borg. Records of that era are insignificant and considered irrelevant, but the facts fit. We have now determined to the proper decade the present date should be; the needed equipment will be available."

A drone came into the nodal intersection, carrying a coiled length of dark metal. Jad automatically turned his head to follow the movement, then gasped at what he saw. Just enough of a black turtleneck was poking above a bodysuit neckline to make Vorezze more closely examine the bald head and mottled gray face sporting a distinctive scar down the right side.

"Lieutenant Franson!" called Vorezze, drawing Captain out of his discussions within the sub-collective. Although he had been responding to the Federation captain, the majority of his attention had been in the nets. Captain checked the location of local drones as he turned to confirm identity visually. It was 187 of 230, one of the new units from the recent assimilation of the Banshee crew. In normal times she would have been kept asleep in stasis, to limit corruption from individuality, until she could be transferred to another cube, but in the present emergency all drones were needed.

187 of 230 ignored Jad, instead lifting a panel from a bulkhead to reveal a maze of wires and conduits. Captain could feel 187 of 230 tightly focused on her task to replace a cracked support within the interstitial space.

"Lieutenant Carla Franson! I know it is you." Jad's attention shifted to Captain, "Captain Borg," Captain winced at the inappropriate title the Betazoid used, "that is Franson, isn't it?"

"That drone is 187 of 230, assigned to the engineering hierarchy. Carla Franson no longer exists."

"No...it can't be. I can see her right there in front of me." Captain watched in interest as Vorezze's face scrunched up slightly as eyes behind glasses narrowed. At the same time, a primitive nonBorg presence reached towards the mental signature which was 187 of 230. Captain

easily ejected the probe from the sub-collective, but not before 187 of 230 was booted out of her focused state, dropping the coil of metal to the deck with a clatter. The drone looked with question towards the head of Cube #347.

"Carla...do you recognize me now?" asked Jad once more.

187 of 230 altered her awareness to include Vorezze. She was obviously not fully processed, many prostheses and assemblages yet to be attached. Some surgery had been done on face and skull, but external optic augmentation was not present. Still, her essence had been absorbed into the Collective...or would have been had the Collective been heard. As was, Captain could feel the subtle indicators of borderline assimilation imperfection, signs which could have been suppressed and corrected had 187 of 230 been directly transferred to a normal cube. Assimilation's hierarchy was doing its best to shield her and the other new drones from the bulk of the sub-collective's problems, but in the case of 187 of 230 it was a slowly losing cause.

"Carla Franson is no longer relevant. This drone is designated 187 of 230."

"But...but..." continued Jad. He never finished his comment as 187 of 230 interrupted, confusion in her mental signature apparent to Captain.

"There are not enough voices. We do not hear enough voices. Where are the others?" Pause as she accessed the nets. "I do not know you...you are not of the voices." Another pause as Captain felt 187 of 230 rapidly search through memory files. "You are Captain Jad Vorezze of the Federation starship Banshee. Although you are not noted a specimen suited for assimilation, you must be added to the Collective. There are not enough voices...never enough voices." 187 of 230 began to approach Jad malevolently, arms reaching forwards to grasp. Vorezze's eyes widened as he gave a short yelp, scrambling backwards, bumping into Captain.

{187 of 230!} sent Captain to the advancing drone. {You will desist these actions and return to your alcove. Now!} Strings of appended code forced compliance. 187 of 230 stopped in her tracks, flashed Captain what could only be described as a dirty look, before turning to leave via an open doorway.

Jad was sprawled on his behind at Captain's feet, looking up. It appeared to be dawning in his face just how close to assimilation he had come...from a former shipmate.

"You are undamaged," observed Captain as he examined Jad, comparing the sight to stored data describing a healthy Betazoid specimen. "You have not been assimilated; you are still more useful in your current state."

Vorezze rapidly scrambled to his feet, pulling down a uniform top which had ridden up enough to show pale expanse of belly. "She did not know me."

"Correction - 187 of 230 did know you, but it was irrelevant. You are not her commanding officer any longer, but a member of a species designated for eventual incorporation into the Collective."

Jad looked shaken; he was staring in the direction his former crew member had left. "What did she mean about not enough voices?"

"187 of 230 should not be awake, but due to mitigating circumstances there is little choice but to use every drone available. She is primed for trillions of voices, not four thousand. Needless to say, she is a little confused right now. I made her go back to her alcove and regenerate. Nothing to worry about."

"I think I want to go back to the cargo hold now."

"Fine. I will transport you back." Captain activated the transporter beam, adroitly sending the Betazoid back to the hold, depositing him in the middle of a ration bar and baby food fight.

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187 of 230, once known by the designation of Lieutenant Carla Franson, stood in her assigned alcove, brooding. The encounter with the Banshee captain had catalyzed the realization that the spaces she could hear with her mind were too quiet. There were voices present, but it was as if - 187 of 230's thought patterns momentarily examined the memories of Franson for the metaphor - a small outpost of a few hundred was in a stadium meant for a hundred thousand, attempting to fill up the empty echoes with their cheering.

The potential of greatness when compared with the current reality was depressing.

"Not enough voices," whispered 187 of 230 to herself. She would have to do something about rectifying the problem.

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Cube #347 was on a course directly to planet #1. The approach was open and without hostility; of course, the Borg did not exist yet, so no fear had been learned in response to the appearance of a dreaded cube. Five cylinder-shaped ships, each with three nacelles mounted away from the hull, sped from a station-keeping location of defense in the inner system. There was no overt hostility in the advance, only curious wariness.

As Captain watched the five small ships near, another part of his awareness was absorbing the processed data of sensor sweeps of the propulsion and weaponry systems, reading for signs of possible danger. While weapon power was at a nominal status, the signature of the drives was surprising.

{Sensors, is this data correct?}

Sensors was busy herself, focusing sections of the grid at multiple targets throughout the system, altering input frequencies to gain maximum information. And listening to the clamoring of disgusted confusion among her hierarchy as she tuned parts of the array to the less used fractions of the spectrum.

{Sensors says that it is correct. Those ships have transwarp.}

Transwarp? The data thus collected indicated a technological base just beyond that of the Federation; transwarp should not have been developed as yet, but the signatures were nearly the twin of what Cube #347 itself sported.

Captain interrupted Second from his duties, wanting a sounding board for the conclusions both himself and the deeper subconscious patterns of the sub-collective were reaching.

{What?} snapped Second from his current location near Auxiliary Core #5. {I'm just a slight bit busy right now.}

{Too bad. This will only take a few seconds. I exercise my authority as Captain.} Captain paused to align his concerns. {Historical data shows we had transwarp eleven years after the Collective came into existence.}

Second sighed, {Yes, files indicate transwarp was present after the assimilation of species #2.}

{But species #2 did not contribute transwarp to our technological base.}

{No. Are we done yet?}

Continued Captain, {The origin of Borg is not fully documented, but it is clear species #1 was the progenitor of the Collective and there was no extradimensional or extragalactic influence. Therefore, how could there be transwarp at this stage of development?}

A long pause as Second rustled around in the deeper archives, looking for an answer. Without the knowledge base of the Greater Consciousness, only one possibility was forthcoming. {A reoccurring theory found among nonassimilated species states advance is a product of current technology, need for the proposed invention, and a mind to develop it. Space-faring races always want a way to travel faster, so need is present; and technologically, species #1 has the theoretical base to develop transwarp, although the need for many specialized industries would make primary implementation economically expensive without a mind directing the effort. Therefore, it is the conclusion that some genius beat the low probability odds to design transwarp and put it into production.}

Captain mulled over the answer; it would have to do. Second was released back to his duty as a hail was received from the lead cylinder.

* * * * *

Jad hated waiting. He /knew/ something was happening, knew with his keen captain-sense that Important Things were occurring. The fact that Jad also knew the cube would soon be making contact with its nonassimilated ancestors and he had to sit and twaddle his thumbs didn't help any. Without displays to tell if the ship was moving, stationary, or destroying entire civilizations, there was no outlet for Jad to vent his frustration of Not Being In Charge.

For the umpteenth time, Jad completed a pacing circuit across the commons area, unconsciously avoiding busy crew as they tidied from the earlier food fight. He wanted an update on the situation, and he wanted it now!

"Irrelevant cogs in some vast machine, that is what we are. These may be supposed individuals, but they sure have all the rude mannerisms of Borg to forget about little things like their passengers," Vorezze muttered to himself as he came to a temporary halt, leaning against a cubicle wall. The partition swayed slightly under the weight, but did not collapse.

Dan looked up from where he was sitting nearby, intently examining a PADD. The device gave a series of beeps as he put it down. "Jad, face it: the Borg here see us as tools, just like they see their own drones, individuality or no individuality. We will be used as appropriate, stored until useful again, and discarded when worn out or no longer needed."

Jad stared at Dan, "That's a lousy attitude. I know you tend to look at the darker side, but that is just plain pessimistic."

A shrug, then reach for the PADD. "I just try to look at the reality of the situation, sir."

* * * * *

"Not enough voices. Never enough voices." The litany was taking on the quality of a religious fervor, for lack of a better analogy. 187 of 230 repeated the phrase to herself over and over again. She had discovered she could keep a small part of herself isolated from the others of the sub-collective, and in this personal space her plan took shape. It was time for action.

Reaching out through the intranets, carefully keeping impulses to the lesser used parts of the dataspace, 187 of 230 found the seventeen others whom had once been a part of the Banshee night shift. Most had been assigned to the engineering hierarchy, although two were under the command of Weapons, and one reeled within the odd perceptions of the sensory hierarchy. None of the seventeen had been completely modified with Borg hardware, but all acknowledged the feeling of smallness, of artificial isolation.

<< There are not enough voices >> was the consensus of the eighteen, 187 of 230 leading the thoughts of her ex-crewmates. All, working in a mode of oneness the general sub-collective of Cube #347 seemed unable to achieve, finalized their plan.

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Species #1 was rare in the contemporary Borg Collective, a relic which had been mostly replaced thousands of years ago by more efficient sophonts. Some specimens were still present, but they were the vast minority in a race of trillions. The Collective as a consciousness had long since grown beyond the ability to be contained in one race, but the old was a part of the ultimate One to be achieved, so drones of species #1 were still propagated and used. Captain himself had never directly seen a member of species #1, nor had any of the sub-collective of Cube #347, although a racial dossier could be accessed with ease. It was different seeing the original Borg race in real-time.

The member of species #1 on the viewscreen was nervously flicking his eyes up and down, taking in the scene of impersonal walkways as he listened to the Collective Voice feed. The Llarn male, for that was the original special name, was a typical humanoid in appearance. Aspects of the skeletal structure and general biology were unusual, but those already known facts could not be seen from the exterior. Two eyes with vertically slit pale orange pupils, ridged nose, lipless mouth, no visible external ears, an elongated skull, short black hair on the head and absent elsewhere succinctly described the individual. Completing the picture was the black uniform with gray trim, a complicated green and silver insignia located on the shoulders of both sleeves.

The normal pronouncement of doom had been suppressed in the effort to open negotiations for parts without the need to alter history. Captain was trying to pass off the cube as a deep space exploratory vessel in need of repair - half-truths better than outright lies. The military bureaucrat at the other end was buying the deception, at least enough to pass the buck higher in the system.

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The course of action was set, command codes readied, critical files and data branches prepared to be substituted for the originals. Through the preparation << There are not enough voices >> echoed in the background like a broken record. Finally Cube #347 went into orbit around planet #1. Time to act, time to set things right. Leaping through the ship systems, 187 of 230 and her comrades took control of transporters.

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Jad sampled the latest mush to come from the replicator, then frowned. "Riley, this tastes exactly like...nothing."

David nodded, "Yes, sir. It took a lot of work to edit out all the flavors."

"Why? One might as well be eating a ration bar, except this has the capability to be spooned instead of gnawed."

"Captain, if there are no flavors, it is possible start from the blank template and modify the mush exactly, instead of tweaking one widget or another and hoping what comes out doesn't taste like dog food."

Jad brightened, "So, it might be possible to get something along the lines of a vanilla shake or chocolate pudding, instead of a paste that has the distinctive tones of Klingon cuisine?"

David was about to form a defense of his Klingon line of ethnic food replicator programming when a commotion broke out on the other side of the commons. The chief engineer shut his mouth and followed Jad's gaze to the multitudes of green transporter effects which were forming. Cryptically called Dan from his sitting place nearby where he had been playing a game of Break-Out on a PADD, "Looks like our number is up; the tool is no longer useful." It definitely seemed so.

Eight humanoid shapes, curiously lacking in the finished cyborg appearance, materialized from the beams, grabbing an equal number of stunned crew who had been gossiping nearby. All eight were roughly injected with assimilation tubules, then left to slump to the deck. Elsewhere in the land of cubicles, the shouts and cries of alarm told of similar actions occurring out of direct sight. The Borg in the common area scattered, searching for more bodies. The more astute would have realized only members of the engineering night shift were being targeted, but calm minds was not the order of the day. Useless phaser fire erupted from various security crew.

A black dog dodged through the melee, heading towards a certain drone. As she closed, the Borg in question began to sneeze violently, doubling over as it fended off both excited animal and involuntary coughs. Another Borg turned from its pursuit of a cowering ensign to boot the dog away. Blackie tumbled across the deck, rolling to a halt stunned but unharmed. She raised her head and whined, confusion in her eyes at the betrayal of the one which smelled vaguely like her Master.

As suddenly as the attack had begun, it ended. The Borg disappeared in a flurry of green special effects, as did those who had been caught. Silence reined throughout the large hold, profound quiet broken only by the barking of a pair of dogs and the angry scream of a parrot.

Jad looked up at the ceiling and shouted, "What the hell did we do wrong? I thought we had a deal! Captain Borg, are you listening to me?"

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"...Captain Borg, are you listening to me?"

A certain "Captain Borg" was indeed listening, but did not have time to deal with Vorezze, at least not immediately. Command codes had just swamped the system, triggering everything from a sensor blackout ({Sensors is blind!} went the piercing protest through the general intranet) to the mass triggering of the transporters. It was the last which was the most disturbing, as forty-five signatures were sent to the planet below, destination unknown. Captain could not stop the actions, as collateral scrambling of the dataspace locked his mind and hierarchy out of the net pathways; the loss of control was only momentary, but it was long enough. The incoming damage reports to software and files were disturbing.

The most current representative of species #1 was patiently waiting for a reply to a question she had asked, something to do with length of stay. Captain hurriedly sent a reply that technical difficulties demanded immediate attention, and negotiations would have to wait. The female looked extremely miffed as the connection was severed. Resultant hails to reinitiate contact were ignored.

The forty-five escapees, eighteen drones assimilated from the Banshee crew and twenty-seven (probably unwilling) passengers, could not be located. Records for the termini of the transportation had been corrupted beyond repair and Borg life signs were drowned to

insignificance among the signatures of the billions of sentients on the planet. The best Captain could do was narrow the beam down point to a one hundred kilometer radius within a densely populated region. The link to the drones of the surface remained, but it had been reduced to a mere carrier wave and, thus, was no use for location. Attempts to widen the link and make the drones respond were rejected.

A consensus was called, possible actions examined, a tentative solution devised. Captain disliked the result, but it had the highest probability of success.

The scene in Bulk Cargo Hold #3 was chaotic. The majority of the remaining Banshee crew were avidly wondering if they were next to be taken. The senior officers were trying to restore order and discover who had been abducted, except for Vorezze. The Banshee captain was next to the containment field barring the main entry to the cargo hold, trying to look into the dark corridors without zapping himself senseless. Occasionally he would call out for "Captain Borg", but was otherwise not helping the others of the command staff.

Captain transported himself to the hallway directly outside of Bulk Cargo Hold #3, then stepped smartly through the barrier. Vorezze's face registered startlement as his demands were suddenly answered.

"Vorezze, if you do not stop calling me 'Captain Borg', I will assimilate you. The services we require from your crew will be adequate whether or not you are among them. This is your final warning."

Jad took a step back, raising his hands as if to ward off an attack. When none was forthcoming, he replied angrily, "Okay, okay! Whatever you say...Captain. I want to know why you took a bunch of my people."

"We did not authorize the assimilations," said Captain brusquely as he strode to the center of the commons. "There has been a change of plans, which necessitates an alteration in our bargain. You will bring your command staff to me. Now."

Vorezze's face began to turn red at the order, obviously resenting the words which did not allow for disagreement. Captain did not care; he was the one in charge of the situation, he was the one with the responsibility. If it was possible, he would gladly give the entire mess to Vorezze, if only to observe how long the Federation captain could retain his sanity. If he was a bit abrupt at the moment and it offended Vorezze, so be it. The senior officers gathered.

In the circle of calm at the center of a milling mass of stunned people, Captain addressed Vorezze and his wide-eyed command staff:

"We have a slight problem. It appears 187 of 230, a former member of this Banshee crew, has gone somewhat insane, infecting seventeen others, also of your ex-crew. They, and twenty-seven abducted from this cargo hold, have beamed down to the surface." Captain paused. "And we sort of lost them."

Here ends Part Two of "Cube #347's Excellent Adventure". Be sure to continue reading Part Three and experience the conclusion of the epic.